How We Won (and Now Might Lose) the War: Reflections on Iraq

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Remarks presented at Sandia National Laboratories
October 12, 2004

I just returned from Iraq where I spent a little over 9 months trying to help the Iraqi educational system get up and running. Just before I left, I received a letter from the Pentagon asking all of us who served if we could write out a few paragraphs about the lessons we learned in Iraq that might be useful to future Pentagon planners.

Well, I thought about it for a while and realized that there was nothing I could do in a few paragraphs that would be of use to anyone. But maybe, in an hour or so, I can make a start here. Since I was eyewitness to a society struggling to be born, and also, in many ways, an old way of life deteriorating and dying at the same time, there's an amazing amount to say.

I only want to tell you about what I saw and experienced first-hand. I was the Coalition Authority's Senior Advisor for Higher Education and Scientific Research—which means in Iraq, primarily academic research, or scholarship—although I'm a political scientist and theorist by training. This means that most of what I have to draw upon today comes from my experiences within the higher education community and my reflections on the political situation as I saw and analyzed it. So, I apologize at the outset for talking so much this morning about university life and political life, and not more interesting things like sex or electricity.

I went to Iraq not knowing much about Iraq. This wasn't as big a liability as we might think off-hand. In actual fact, IRAQIS know very little about Iraq. Many of them know their religion and its customs; but often only the teachings of their sect or faction. The average Iraqi knows very little about his world, his culture, his history, his geography, or his neighbor, whether it be his neighbor across the border or his neighbor across the street. Living under an all-encompassing tyranny for thirty-five years narrowed their focus to their families, their professions, perhaps their tribe and ultimately themselves. In any event, what most Iraqis I met wanted was not so much to be understood as, once again, to understand—to understand all that they had been kept from for over three decades. As I was constantly reminded, my job over there wasn't to go and admire their culture, or understand it or help them celebrate it—it was to help them sweep out the vestiges of an old way of life and give them insights into a better way of life; or, as many made clear to me, into OUR way of life.

In many ways, what was most troubling to me was not America's ignorance of Iraq or even Iraqis ignorance of Iraq, but American's ignorance of America—of what makes us tick, what makes our democracy work, what causes our progress and prosperity, what parts of human character are universal and what parts are particular to us as Americans.

The first thing I learned about America is that we often are confused when it comes to knowing the truth about ourselves. Let me give an example: We talk all the time about

how hard-nosed we are, how realistic, how selfish, self-interested and devoted we are to taking care of number one. But it's not true. I worked with hundreds of American civilians over there who left comfortable jobs and good pay and family comforts to live in construction trailers, four to a trailer, work 18 hour days, seven days a week, for less pay than they made back home, all to help a people they never met manage their new-found freedom. And it wasn't just us over there. Whenever I'd call home I was always asked if the bleak news reports were all true or were we making a difference. Every American I knew wanted us to make a difference. Not for oil, or to enrich Halliburton, or for any of the other, to be honest, nonsensical reasons some people said we were over there, but because the average American wanted us to make a difference for the Iraqis themselves, and get these people back on their feet.

Don't get me wrong. I don't believe that most of us who went did it for Pollyannaish humanitarian reasons exactly. We were, none of us, liberal do-gooders or bleeding-heart lovers of humanity. No, the liberal do-gooders all stayed home and criticized our being over there. No, we went there because we all thought that freedom and equality and general prosperity was something we wanted to help them achieve for their sakes and, ultimately, make no mistake about it, for ours. A stable, prosperous, free, and democratic Iraq, a Muslim nation friendly to the west, tolerant and respectful of rights, could be the best antidote to international terrorism we could have. We went as part of a great experiment in liberal democratic nation building, yes, for their sakes, because everyone deserves to live in freedom—but mostly because liberal democratic nations will be, in the end, the only trustworthy defense abroad against terror here at home.

Seen in that light, the venture in Iraq was both idealistic and solidly realistic. Nothing made us prouder than to see our Iraqi friends when Saddam was captured. I could not imagine being involved in a more generous, humanitarian endeavor than that. But it was also, we should not forget, a matter of our own long-range self-interest as well. That is, if it succeeds.

I wanted to mention our generosity as a people along with our more self-interested goals because I think we forget just how other-directed we often are as a people. I mention it first, because I think it affects how we think about democracy; how we think about people ruling over themselves and their neighbors. Our particular character might lead us to look at democracy as the way all people should live; but maybe it takes a generous and neighborly people to make democracy really work. More on this in a few minutes.

Our generosity might lead us astray in other ways. For example, we tend to be enormously respectful of religion. We tend to see religion as always a force for good in the world. We look at ourselves and see how Christianity has so forcefully commanded us to love our neighbors, to sacrifice and be of service to others, to turn the other cheek, and to stifle our worst habits of self-interest and selfishness. And we inherited from Protestant Christianity a healthy respect for freedom, self-reliance, and not a little skepticism of authority. All these teachings have been of enormous use to us in our life together as a people. And, because of that, we tend to see religion simply as a good.

But candor requires that we be clear-sighted about the dangers religious fervor and devotion can have. I am not one who believes we have an enemy in Islam. If Islam is the enemy, then America's attempt to set up a free, prosperous, stable and secure state whose citizens are strongly attached to their religion would be an act of foolishness verging on idiocy. Nonetheless, in dealing with Islam we cannot be blinded into thinking that they're just like us, only with a few different beliefs here and there. Despite all that we might point to in the Gospels regarding peace and love and charity and brotherhood, we should never forget the bloody nature of Christianity before it was beaten down by its own religious wars and then tamed by the Enlightenment. But our history, the history of the taming of the sanguinary nature of Christianity by Modernity in its many forms, is not particularly Islam's history, though I had the pleasure of working with many Muslims who were pushing in that direction. We must not forget that Islam is the only one of the great monotheistic religions still unsubverted by the Enlightenment or European rationalism or theories of liberal capitalism.

Remember, what a person believes in shapes his or her outlook and activities more, I dare say, than his socio-economic class or her sex, or his ethnic roots or her race. Somehow, we got it into our heads, especially in higher education, that a person is the outcome of the interplay of class, race and gender when, in the real world, most people are pushed or pulled by the demands of their basic human nature influenced greatly by the horizon they see before them. And that horizon is, in towns, villages and cites across the globe, shaped more by the teachings of religion than any other factor. Which is why the establishment of a tolerant, liberal, capitalist, egalitarian, prosperous, and democratic state in the heart of the Middle East is one of our highest hopes and also the greatest fear of the jihadists and radical fundamentalists.

A few almost-random observations before I go on: Our particular character as Americans leads us to be surprised at things we shouldn't be surprised about. We talk a lot about "evil" these days, but we always seem to ascribe evil to big things—empires, regimes, economic systems, whole nations. I think many times we fail to see evil when it's writ small. While Saddam once did have weapons of mass destruction—we know because he used them in Iran and against the Kurds—he was not evil because he had destructive armaments but because he was a psychopathic sadist who survived through, and seemed personally to enjoy, the torture, degradation, and blood of other humans. This evil didn't end when no weapons were found.

But more: Iraq was not a tyranny driven by a particular ideology. It was closer to the very personal tyranny of, say, an Idi Amin, than to the rule of a Hitler or Stalin or Mao. It was, in that sense, more like the great despotisms of the age before Modernity, where the ruler ruled for the satisfaction of his personal, idiosyncratic, and often debased and even degenerate desires. I say this because we have to understand that totalitarianism, terror, and evil come in many guises, following many banners—ideological, religious, racial, national, personal, and secular. And we oversimplify the complexity and variety of the enemies of human dignity, liberty and democracy at our peril.

I also mention this because thirty five years under a very personal and debased tyranny have left ordinary Iraqis with so low an opinion of human nature that winning their trust

was sometimes very hard. For thirty-five years they saw their friends disappear for saying a critical word or telling a private joke about Saddam—and they all knew that someone they trusted, some friend or neighbor, had ratted on them. When I asked Iraqis why so many of them married their cousins, the answer always was, best to marry within the family; who better could they trust. It's hard to be greeted as liberators when probably half the country always thought that, at some point, we'd make a deal with Saddam—maybe he'd give us oil in return for his power back. Then we'd hand him over to the collaborators. And when the pictures came out of Abu Graib prison of Americans acting in ways as degenerate as Saddam and his sons, the Iraqi view that no one should be trusted was sadly, horribly reinforced. We Americans may talk about self-interest, the Iraqis seem only to know how to act on it.

There are two lessons to be learned here, and I think we have to be very careful to keep them clear. The first is that evil isn't always large, impersonal, and somewhere 'out there.' It's often small, personal and living inside each of us. The Iraqis had a phrase for bad people—they'd refer to them as "mini-Saddams." But their experience didn't lead them all that often to grapple with the mini-Saddams within themselves, but to suspect all those around them of being akin to Saddam. We Americans, on the other hand, tend to have too smiling a view of human nature; when we see evil, we see it in ideology or material forces or external causes, like poverty. The responsibility is rarely personal. But the Iraqis, beaten down as they were, are opposite to this. They have a hard time seeing and trusting the better angels of their or their neighbors' natures. To them, evil looms large in their natures. This, too, will make democracy there very difficult.

Let's not forget that I was in Iraq to help them revive and restructure their system of higher education. Iraq once had perhaps the finest system of higher education in all of the Middle East, at least of a certain sort. But it was pauperized under Saddam and then further pauperized under the sanctions imposed by the UN. Unlike our universities here in America, however, Iraqi universities know nothing, ever, of what we might call liberal education. One does not go to a university in Iraq to learn about the world at large, to learn some history, study some philosophy, read a few great books, learn some science and get another foreign language under one's belt. No. Education in Iraq is highly specialized—you go to college to learn how to be something in particular, and you graduate after four or sometimes five years an expert in something—engineering, medicine, law, computers.

Moreover, not all fields are created equal in Iraq—medicine, science and engineering are the fields where the smartest students are expected to go; the humanities, the social sciences and teaching are usually what the less gifted study. Note, most Iraqis don't enter a field based on their interest or ability as much as on their intelligence. An ordinary student can't work hard in hopes of maybe someday becoming a doctor; a gifted student would be seen as wasting his talents if he wanted to study art or music or philosophy.

I think it is clear why autocratic governments, bent as they are on power and control and even conquest, prize science and engineering and medicine so highly. I took it as part of my job to have the Iraqis also see that if they meant to be a free and democratic people, that other fields had now to be prized as well. Of what good would their new leaders be

who had no grounding in history, or economics, or democratic theory? Who knew nothing about other cultures or religions, or who spoke no other language than their own? It was no accident that democratic government and the liberal arts grew up together in America, though we tend to forget how important they are to each other.

And important not only because democracies need intelligent and perceptive leaders, but because democracies die if the people themselves are narrow or blind or ignorant. We shouldn't forget that one reason there were so few democracies before the rise of the American experiment was that democracies were always considered foolish places, places where the people—that is, those who ruled—were too uneducated to know good policies from bad, or intelligent from foolish national direction. We shouldn't forget that Jefferson asked that on his tombstone be written the three highlights of his life—that he wrote the Declaration of Independence, that he authored the Virginia Declaration of Religious Freedom and that he helped start the University of Virginia. Starting a great liberal arts university was, to Jefferson, more connected to the independence and success of America than being President.

Little by little the Iraqis will develop their universities along more liberal and expansive models. But this all led me to think about us here at home as well. I thought about how little we still understand the national value of liberal education. How quickly we ask our students what their major's going to be; how quickly we look for specialization and not breath of vision; how often we raise up certain fields because there's sure employment at the other end; how often we put down literature or classical studies or comparative religion or philosophy with the words, "That's all very nice, dear, but what will you DO with it?" I thought, that is how much like today's Iraqis we are, and shouldn't be.

Some of you may know that, while I was a strong supporter of the war, I've not been too happy with the way we handled the peace, such as it's been. I certainly have been loud about the inadequacy of funding we in higher education received to rebuild the colleges and universities in Iraq. And Ambassador Bremer spoke the simple truth the other day when he said that the first disastrous thing we did in Iraq was to stand aside while the Iraqi criminal class looted their own country. I don't know whether or not more troops would have been the answer since, aside from the oil ministry, the troops we had on the ground did nothing to protect *any* institution or facility or building. Contrary to my good and dear friend, Don Rumsfeld, it is not that freedom is untidy, but that marauders should be stopped from destroying the infrastructure of a whole country. I tell you bluntly, the looting that took place after the war rivaled and perhaps surpassed the deprivation and destruction of thirty-five years of Ba'ath party rule. Moreover, it increased the difficulty of rebuilding Iraq exponentially. It was the first step in making enemies of our friends, who saw that we would protect our goods, but not theirs. And because the looting made reconstruction all that much more difficult, what at first seemed like American omniscience and omnipotence now seemed like impotence and disarray. "We once thought you Americans had the wand of Moses in your hands," the president of the Iraqi Academy of Science once told me, "now we see that you don't." So simple a thing—standing by while the world watched vandals looting a whole country and burning what they couldn't carry off or sell. But it was a turning point in how the world viewed America's power and good sense, and a turning not to our advantage.

I started to say before how little money we were given to accomplish the tasks we had at hand. A Brit, General Figgers, once announced that, lacking funds, our position was to provide all assistance short of actual help. Still, what rarely gets commented on is how much we were able to accomplish even without much money. We could have poured more money into Iraq, and that would have helped for sure. But the truth is that we were of immense help because we gave advice, gave direction, and gave support. Last week, the new Minister of Higher Education in Iraq said that the most important thing that happened under liberation was the destruction of the old Stalinist model of education, wherein all universities were under the control of the minister, who then reported to Saddam, allowing today for the new independence of the universities from central political control. Professors no longer need permission from the government to travel, or go to conferences; people are no longer promoted based on party affiliation; deans are no longer chosen by the Minister to watch over faculty; presidents are no longer chosen by Saddam as a reward for their loyalty; students are no longer rewarded or penalized because of their parents party affiliation. In fact, perhaps the first free elections ever held in Iraq were when my office had each faculty elect its own university president and vice-president.

Still, the biggest challenge facing the independence of the universities and academic freedom lies less today in politics than in religious fanaticism. In response to this growing threat, the university presidents joined together with my office and unanimously passed a declaration of academic rights and responsibilities, declaring the university itself to be a sacred place, under the control of no religious group and following no particular dogma or sect. This means, at least for now, the continued education of women as well as men, and the protection of all subjects, even those not particularly supportive of religious fanaticism or fundamentalism. At least, as I say, for now.

Let me say one last thing about higher education—especially liberal arts education—and its connection to democracy. I had occasion this spring to visit one of the universities in Northern Iraq, in the Kurdish area of that country. There the president of the university in one of the Kurdish cities was dreaming of starting a new college, a liberal arts college, to be attached to his old-line, more specialized university. So I went up to give him a hand. Over dinner, one of my assistants got into an argument with the president over something. The other assistant I had with me leaned over to me and told me to stop them—they were fighting.

But it was clear to me they weren't fighting but arguing: laying out their positions, marshaling evidence, debating the consequences. They were doing something I had not seen in my then nearly six months in Iraq—they were having a rational argument. Before this, I had seen many Iraqis fight but never make an argument—a real argument. It had seemed that to Iraqis, deliberation simply meant stating a position and declaring your belief in it. If more people applauded you than applauded the other guy, you won the argument. But it never had anything really to do with argument or reason or persuasion truly, but simply *assertion*.

When I asked President Asmat why this was the first rational political discussion I had heard in six months in Iraq, he gave me these reasons:

> First, their religion: the truth was written, and if written, it was not to be questioned.
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> Second, their fathers: if their fathers said it, and if his father said it, then it was true. To question what your father has said is tantamount to saying he hasn't told you the truth: so no questioning there either.
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> And third, their education: the professors and the textbook are there to tell you the truth—you are not there to question it, you are to memorize it and repeat it. And if you memorize and repeat it exactly as it was said, you will get a good grade. To question your professor is to say he may have been wrong, or not explained it well. This way of teaching and learning, the president said, had so "infected" the Iraqi mind that he wondered if Iraqis could ever be free, since they were incapable of thinking for themselves. Now they would always wait to be told what to do, wait to be told the truth.

But this, he said, would change. If America would help him, he and a few other university presidents would begin universities, or reform their current universities, so that thinking, questioning and deliberation could take place: We can't change the nature of their religion; we can't change the character of their families—but we can change their educational experience. We can let students *think* about their course of study, choose their majors freely, see more than just their specialties and give them breadth and not just narrow, expert depth. Give them, in summary, the ability to reflect and choose. Give them the tools for rational deliberation. Then, maybe, democracy would grow.

With this, the true and complete benefit of liberal education to Iraq's future became crystalline: It would not simply be the *courses* common to a liberal arts curriculum—history, philosophy, literature, languages—that would be of value to the new Iraq, but the *method inherent* in the way the liberal arts are regularly taught: discussion, questioning, piecing out answers together by deliberation, weighing differing interpretations of the same event or text, reasoned argument.

Sometimes, in looking for lessons, even the most pedestrian occurrences gave evidence of something greater and more portentous. Take, for instance, the fact that I couldn't go anywhere on campus without this dean or that professor asking me to sign students transfer slips. Would I approve of Ali's or Fuad's or Zeena's transfer from this biology class to that one, or this math class to that one? Why me? I was the Senior Advisor, why would I sign class transfer slips? Only then did I realize how broken everyone was, how afraid everyone was. Not afraid of making a mistake, but of being punished for the smallest mistake. Better to have someone higher up—anyone higher up—sign off on everything, because then you could always shift the blame that way if anything goes wrong. Tyranny built a Culture of Fear in Iraq that nothing could easily erase.

Another example: Professors complained all year about their pay. There's nothing odd there. Professors worldwide complain about their pay. What was odd was that if I suggested that they publish a book or do some consulting or teach an extra class, they were greatly offended. They were not to be paid on the basis of their work, they told me,

but on the basis of their titles. One got paid not for what one did but because of who one was. The hierarchical system of grades and levels under Saddam's tyranny led directly to a culture of privilege that pervades all of Iraq. And, finally, Iraq was, under Saddam, a fully socialist system. Food, housing, electricity, water, gasoline, all the necessities, were supplied free of charge or virtually free of charge to all Iraqis, high or low. And so there developed a culture of dependency that has stifled so much initiative and self-reliance. And I wonder what kind of democracy can come about when there is no self-reliance, no initiative, privilege without work, little independence of thought, and constant fear of acting without permission.

All this, needless to say, holds lessons for us regarding the future of democracy in Iraq. And I think it's here, in trying to make Iraq into a modern democratic state, where we Americans sadly showed how little we know about democratic government in general, or our own democracy in particular.

Soon after we entered Iraq in 2003, we, as the occupying power, decided that power should be shared with the Iraqis themselves. So we set up a Governing Council made up of 25 "stakeholders," as they were called. Who are the stakeholders, I asked. Businessmen, lawyers, doctors, teachers, grocers? No, I was told, the stakeholders are those who represent the major political and religious factions in Iraq.

Let me read you something I wrote last year:

"We're more than happy to do exactly the opposite of what Madison does in Federalist 10—we seek out the loudest and most virulent factions and empower them. Instead of geographic electoral districts where we might hope to encourage the development of moderate candidates, we gather together the representatives of the most antagonistic factions and think that's good democracy. We've done nothing to blur the lines separating people and everything to sharpen them. We will not see moderate and thoughtful people representing the wider interests of Iraq; rather we'll see ideologues chosen for the very reason they were not mild, moderate, or thoughtful but because they were ideologues. It's the corruption that comes with being comfortable with affirmative action as a way to govern—solidify factions and then proportionally empower and reward those factions."

We also made a second mistake. We tend to think, as Americans, that democracy is easy, that Democracy is natural. I'm sorry, but tyranny is easy. Tyranny may even be natural. Democracy takes a thousand ingredients. Democracy is hard. Again, as I wrote:

"America's been so successful at being a free and permanent democracy that we think democracy is the natural way to rule—just let people go and there you have it: Democracy. But all the ingredients that make it good and free—limited government, separation of powers, checks and balances, calendared elections, staggered elections, plurality selection, differing terms of office, federalism but with national supremacy, the development of a civic spirit and civic responsibility—all this we forget about. We act as if the aim is 'democracy' simply and not a mild and moderate democracy."

We act and talk as if Democracy were some kind of panacea for all the world's social and political ills. But we have to remember that our Founders, while they thought highly of the democracy they created, were hardy friends to democracy in general. Democracies, unless almost perfectly constructed, are just as ignorant, oppressive and tyrannical as any other type of government and sometimes more so. A democracy ruled by a majoritarian fanatical religious sect will be both a democracy and a tyranny at the same time. Or, as one of my translators said referring to Sistani, the great Shiite imam: when you Americans talk about democracy you see freedom and rights and respect and toleration. When he sees democracy he sees only power. His sect is in the majority, and your democracy and your elections will end up giving them their chance to rule over and oppress everyone else. That's why Sistani wants elections as soon as possible, and you don't know how to tell him no.

Third, and here's a problem not of our making: You may need a democratic people before you have a democratic government.

John Adams once said that he thought he could fashion a democratic government out of a bunch of robbers and highwaymen, if only they would be forced to watch over each other. I think that's far, far too optimistic. Unless people are willing to work for something in common, unless they are willing to listen to each other, see the others' side, moderate their desires, and compromise, democracy won't work. People who are merely self-interested and act that way probably cannot form a democracy. Unless we are willing to pay taxes without force, abide by electoral decisions we hate, respect minority rights even when we have the full force of the majority on our side, and obey the law even when no one is looking, democracy cannot flourish. We were, let's not forget, a functioning democratic people for over a hundred years before we wrote our constitution, and we even had a hard time holding that union together.

We were trying, when I left, to build a civil society in Iraq—to stand up private clubs, professional associations, ngo's—anything to teach a people separated and atomized and made fearful by tyranny how to work together. It may work; I don't know. But the battle, I do know, is all uphill.

Let me mention one last political mistake we made, and in this mistake we had the backing of many Iraqis. The mistake was this: given the experience Iraq had with tyranny, the last thing it seemed we wanted to set up was any kind of strong leadership. We established a quasi-legislative branch for the Iraqis—the Governing Council of twenty-five—but we established no executive of any sort, no presidency, no head minister. Indeed, we insisted that the presidency of the Council change every month, that every month there be a new leader of the Council. But I think I'm right in saying that Iraq must either prepare a way for strong democratic leadership, or they will wind up with strong anti-democratic leadership. I know of no way to keep leaders from arising in any form of government; and the Iraqis must either find ways of channeling ambitions to work for the public good or they will find men who will seize power against the public good. I know of no way of establishing a democracy without leadership, whether it be a Washington or a Karzai or a Havel or a Mandela. Luckily, I think the Iraqis may have, for the time being, been extremely fortunate in the person of Prime Minister Alawi, even

though we tried, at the beginning, to water down his authority by dividing executive powers between his office and a president.

Let me sum all this up:

I saw, firsthand, the evils that tyranny brings; how a society of fear breaks all decent human connections; how, in such a country, people learned only two things: either to obey or command. I learned how a culture of dependency can so easily unbend the springs of enterprise and initiative. I learned how small the human heart can be made—and how generous, perhaps even naively generous—we Americans can be as a people. (I saw Americans risk their lives just to keep an appointment they made with an Iraqi.) I learned how little we know about what makes our country great and our education important. And I saw how grateful—and also how fearful—a newly liberated people can be regarding their new freedom.

Will liberty, democracy, stability, and economic freedom succeed in Iraq? I think so, but only because it has to. We need to be concerned about the dangers of democracy without toleration and liberty, about popular rule without educated breadth of vision, about religion without limits and without moderation.

Still, given all that, I want to leave us with cautious optimism. The current government is, to be candid, better than the government we administered. It seems to understand the need for personal and public security to exist in order for liberty and democracy to take root and flourish. Despite all the troubles I saw, still all colleges, all universities, all schools, all hospitals, all clinics outside of areas of major insurgent activity are open and working. There are, I've been told, over 150 newspapers published every week in Iraq, and every home now has one or more TV's, all with satellite connection—something no tyranny can or has ever allowed.

My hope is, despite mistakes and missteps, that liberty and democracy only ratchets up one way—and that the taste of liberty leads to a love of liberty; that a taste of democracy leads to more democracy. If this works—and make no mistake, these were the real reasons we entered Iraq, not weapons of mass destruction or cheap oil—then all the world will be better off, not just the Iraqis.

Thank you.